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ABSTRACT

Three action research projects were conducted with the intention of creating peaceful learning environments in Canadian schools from kindergarten to twelfth grade. The first project focused on social skills development, especially conflict management, for elementary school students in a rural New Brunswick school. Staff used Washington state's Seattle Committee for Children's Second Step materials. Although the number of disruptive playground incidents did not diminish significantly, parents and teachers thought that students had developed more prosocial behaviors and had developed skills for handling disputes. The second project evaluated conflict resolution training with elementary and junior high school teachers in an inner city school district. Incidents of violence were less frequent at the intervention school in comparison to the number at the comparison school during the post-test. Teachers identified additional needed work in conflict resolution. The third project engaged high school students in anger management training based on their self reports of disruption of their academic performance from the prevalence of violence in their lives and their suggestion of anger management as a solution. Thirty grade 10 students were randomly assigned to one of two cognitive behavioral treatment groups or to a control group. Eight sessions were conducted twice weekly. Students reported increased awareness of process of anger arousal and increased repertoires of responses. (KDFB)

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CREATING PEACEFUL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This poster reports action research conducted by school-based teams in Canadian schools aimed at "creating peaceful learning environments" in classes from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Projects reported were developed using a protocol requiring a needs assessment, pre- and post-testing, an intervention, and peer dissemination. One team focused on social skills development for elementary school students, the second evaluated conflict resolution training with elementary and junior high school teachers. The third intervention engaged high school students in anger management training based on the students' self reports of disruption of their academic performance from prevalent of violence in their lives. The interventions' success is attributed partly to the participants' engagement in all stages of the research.

"We are professionals: More is required. We ask more of ourselves too. The demands that are put on us are different. More is asked of us because we are more competent, I think. We are more prepared. We can't close our eyes to the fact that when a kid comes to school it is not just academic in order to learn There's got to be balance within him just like within us, and we want to deal with all those aspects of the kids (the child: the student.)"

"We can fight by our knowing how to deal with conflict. Then we can also pass this on to the children, so that would create, that would benefit us and help uscreate a more peaceful learning environment plus at the same time, if we teach that to the children, then, they can also practice that."

"The key word you hed is respect. When we have respect again I mean both sides, we will be able to teach again. It's respect, and it's not only in broken homes, and it's not only in the violent families. Respect comes from the society, and it can come at any time -- year one."

MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITIES

A small school in rural New Brunswick agreed to become part of the research to enable staff and students, with the support of the home, to look at a number of aspects of creating peaceful learning environ-ments. Focus group meetings, informal discussions, and assessment of past experience indicated that this school perceived the need to acquire better means of handling conflict in school. While there was not a concern about weapons or gangs, the staff was concerned that conflict was too often resolved with verbal or physical altercations and these and intimidation were the tools too frequently used. Teachers believed that most conflict was resolved by staff. The school had previously tried a variety of techniques, but without a research component, the school was not able to verify whether there was an actual change in either student or teacher behaviours, or whether there was a simple feeling of well-being generated by pilot work. Often the strategies were dropped when the school sensed things had improved.

A survey was devised that involved pretesting parents, teachers, and students. Incidence charts were designed and implemented to rate types and numbers of conflicts both in the classroom and on the playground. All staff members were trained to use the Seattle Committee for Children's Second Step materials. The school decided to work with these materials while still using local resources as well, like provincial curriculum materials, peer helping, and the school's code of behaviour, to bring about change in the school's environment.

Like the school team in the urban schools reported below, the staff determined at the end of the first year of involvement to continue the project for an extended period of time, as they felt they had only begun to "scratch the surface"

of the skills needed to equip their students with to make them better able to deal with conflicts and differences.

In year two, the school implemented peer mediation to supplement the first-year materials. Staff accommodated the fact that the community plays a significant role in creating an environment where peaceful learning might occur, and so in the second year, parents and the wider community were more deeply involved. Some staff members have examined their own beliefs and practices regarding student behaviour and conflict and have noted that they, too, need to be more aware of providing the most peace-supportive environments within their own classrooms and in the hallways and playgrounds.

While disruptive incidents on the playground seemed not to have diminished significantly, students were seen by their parents and teachers as having developed more prosocial behaviours as well as having more skills for handling disputes than was the case before the interventions were introduced.

While this rural school has not been noted as one with particular problems with violence, it sees its involvement in this action research as assisting students and families in developing more effective means of creating peaceful learning environments.

TEACHER EDUCATION IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION: BEGINNING STEPS FOR CHANGE

The work of this urban school district emerged out of an inner city early childhood preventative and compensatory education programme. The programme resulted from this district's commitment to extend their concern for creating peaceful learning environments across all grade levels, and to focus on strategies relevant at the classroom level for responding to concerns about the ways in which students arrive

at school not yet ready to engage in constructive academic pursuits.

The schools prepared to embrace all aspects of the team's protocol were enlisted in the research, and other schools prepared to go part of the way, were involved at first as comparison schools, and ultimately as beneficiaries of the evaluations of the piloted interventions.

In needs-assessment focused group-discussions, the teachers agreed that the role of the teacher, and demands placed on them were different than was historically the case: The staff perceived their greatest need to be in the area of conflict resolution training, first, for themselves, and ultimately, for the children.

It was therefore agreed that inservice work in this area be organized. Teachers consented to describe in open-ended format their pre-intervention perceptions of conflict and its resolution, and to document for one full week incidents of conflict in their classes and in the playground. Training for the intervention school occurred over five days, the province and the school district providing resources to release staff for training while school was in session.

Post-test results revealed subtle shifts in perceptions related to conflict. In the intervention school, documented incidents of violence decreased in comparison to those in the comparison school. But most interesting, perhaps, was the consensus that after one year of involvement, the necessary work had just begun. Training in conflict resolution for teachers, while of some value, was seen now as only a small part of the picture. Subsequent needed work was identified in continuing staff focus-sessions to determine a unified approach to issues of classroom disruption, in clarification of school codes of conduct, in social skills development, and for peer mediation programmes for students.

CHECKING OUT THE STUDENTS

This project focuses to a greater degree than that of the other teams on the perceptions of the students. Although work was done in this district from kindergarten to twelfth grade, the high school project offers an instructive and contrastive application that could be used with modifications at other levels, and suggestions will be made as to how this might be done.

At the needs assessment stage, this school team uncovered a lack of unanimity regarding either the greatest need in the school for affording a peaceful learning environment, or the most appropriate mechanism to be used to affect that goal. It was agreed, therefore, to go to the students themselves for input and direction. A school group convened and developed a questionnaire which was administered to all the students in the school, which inquired as to the experience of each with regard to violence in their daily lives at home and in school, and solicited suggestions as to what the school might do to create a peaceful environment conducive of constructive learning.

The findings were instructive. While slightly over half of the students reported never experiencing physical violence, and a third, never experiencing emotional violence, about one third reported experiencing violence of some sort at least once in the past six months, and about one tenth reported experiencing violence on a daily basis (please see Figure 1). Students reported that it was intimates, siblings and friends who perpetrated the most violence. One third of both males and females reported themselves to have acted violently in the past six months, that violence was frequently reciprocal.

Students identified drugs or alcohol as primary sources of increased violence among youth in society today, but perhaps most interestingly, they indicated that they believed that lack of parental discipline was a major factor (Figure 2), along with gun glorification, peer pressure, and violent media.

The school was relieved to learn that it was perceived by students to be a relatively safe place to be, but outside the classrooms, at the corner, and at home, violent disruptions occurred at a rate not acceptable either to the students, or to their teachers. When asked what the school might do to alleviate the problem, the number one remedy proposed was anger management training (ascribed to by about 60% of

respondents). Other solutions involved counseling, conflict mediation, and other educational remedies.

In consequence, the school and the Family Violence Research Centre have obtained support from a provincial Victims' Services fund of the Solicitor General for student training in anger management. This programme is currently under development. The initial implementation involved a group of thirty tenth-grade students assigned at random to one of two cognitive-behavioural educational treatment groups (based on Feindler & Ecton, 1986) or non-intervention control group. Eight sessions, conducted twice a week for four weeks. Changes affected included increased awareness both of processes on anger arousal, and increased repertoires of responses to anger provoking situations. Whole classroom interventions are also planned.

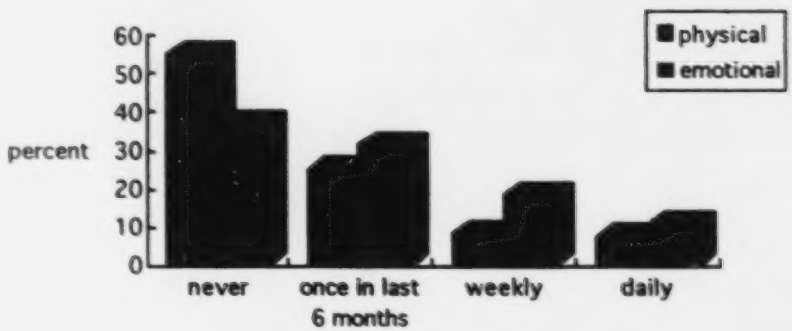

Figure 1. Percent responding to: How often are you a victim?

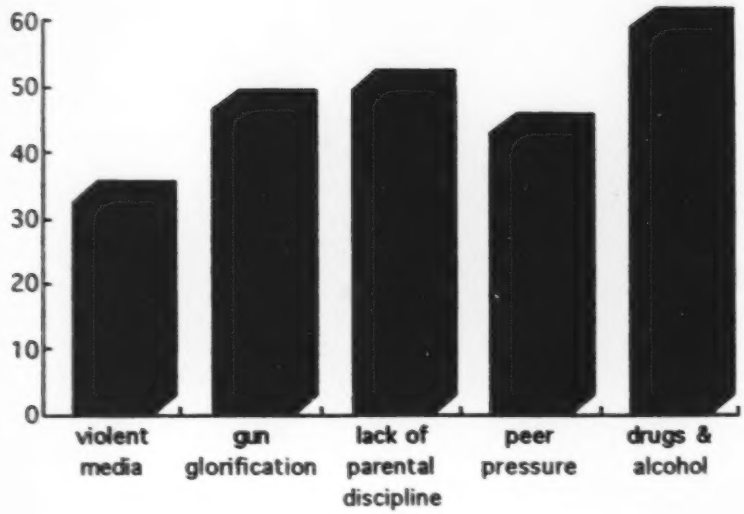

Figure 2. Percentage of students identifying causes of increasing youth violence.

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